



“When You Enter the Land” Land as a Place, Aspiration, or Outcome

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Our *parashah*, as one can see already from its name, presents us with a particularly relevant challenge: What is the meaning of the phrase “when you enter the land,” and what are its ramifications in our day and age, in which life in the state of Israel, situated in the land of Israel, is a present, everyday reality for many Jews? What was the meaning of the phrase and what were its ramifications throughout the many generations in which Jews did not live in their land, or lived there, but with no sovereignty?

The *parashah* opens with the *mitzvah* of the giving of first fruits (*bikkurim*):

דברים כו, א' – ב'

"וְהָיָה כִּי-תָבֹא אֶל-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ נַחֲלָה וַיְרִשְׁתָּהּ וַיֵּשְׁבְּתָּ בָּהּ: וְלִקְחֹתָ מִבְּרִיאֵתוֹ
כָּל-פְּרִי הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר תִּבְרֵא מֵאֲרָצְךָ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לְךָ וְשָׂמַתָּ בַטֶּנָּא וְהִלַּכְתָּ אֶל-הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר
יְבַסֵּר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשָׂגוֹן שָׁמוֹ שָׁם:

Devarim 26:1-2

When you enter the land that YHVH your God is giving you as a heritage, and you possess it and settle in it, you shall take some of every first fruit of the soil, which you harvest from the land that YHVH your God is giving you, put it in a basket and go to the place where YHVH your God will choose to establish His name.

What is the meaning of the phrase “when you enter the land,” and how should we understand the connection between it and the *mitzvah* of *bikurim*?

The word “land,” or more specifically the phrases that accompany it: “When you enter the land,” “and when God has brought you into the land,” can be understood in different ways. One well-accepted and logical reading holds that the phrases refer, simply, to a place. According to this understanding, the verses that open our *parashah* teach us that, when we come to the land, we will be obligated to bring the gift of the first fruits or, more precisely, that we will be obligated in this *mitzvah only* when we come to the land.

The phrase “when you enter,” in its various conjugations, appears quite frequently in the Torah. Thus, for example, it appears in the context of the description of the Pesah sacrifice given by the Jews during the exodus from Egypt:

שמות יב, כ"א – כ"ח

וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה לְכָל זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מֵשְׁכּוּ וּקְחוּ לָכֶם צֹאן לְמִשְׁפַּחְתִּיכֶם וְשַׁחֲטוּ הַפֶּסַח:
וּלְקַחְתֶּם אֲגֵדַת אֲזֹב וּטְבַלְתֶּם בָּדָם אֲשֶׁר בְּסֹף וְהַגַּעְתֶּם אֶל הַמִּשְׁקֹף וְאֶל שְׁתֵּי הַמְּזוּזֹת מִן הַדָּם אֲשֶׁר
בְּסֹף וְאַתֶּם לֹא תֵצְאוּ אִישׁ מִפֶּתַח בֵּיתוֹ עַד בֹּקֶר: ...וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה לְחֹק לְךָ וּלְבְנֶיךָ עַד
עוֹלָם: וְהָיָה כִּי תֵבְאוּ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְתֵן ה' לָכֶם כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת הָעֶבֶדָה הַזֹּאת:

Shemot 12:21-28

Moshe then summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them: “Go, pick out lambs for your families, and slaughter the passover offering. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the

blood that is in the basin, and apply some of the blood that is in the basin to the lintel and to the two doorposts. None of you shall go outside the door of his house until morning... You shall observe this as an institution for all time, for you and for your descendants. And *when you enter the land* that God will give you, as He has promised, you shall observe this rite."

In other words, the obligation of observing the Pesah sacrifice would only begin upon entering the land. Thus also in additional contexts, such as:

שמות יג, י"א – ט"ז

וְהָיָה כִּי יָבֹאֲךָ ה' אֶל אֶרֶץ ... וְהַעֲבַרְתָּ כָּל פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם לֵה' וְכָל פֶּטֶר שֶׁגֶר בְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה לָּךְ הַזְכָּרִים לֵה' ... וְהָיָה לְאוֹת עַל יָדְכָה וּלְטוֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ כִּי בְּחֹזֶק יָד הוֹצִיאָנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם:

Shemot 13:11-16

And *when God has brought you* into the land... you shall set apart for God every first issue of the womb... And so it shall be as a sign upon your hand and as a symbol on your forehead that with a mighty hand God freed us from Egypt.

According to the interpretation we suggested above, it appears from these verses that the *mitzvot* of *tefillin* (phylacteries) and *pidyon ha-ben* (redemption of the first-born) are *mitzvot* that need only be fulfilled in the land.

However, we find two additional interpretations for the phrase in our exegetical tradition. The first, from the school of Rabbi Yishmael, is similar to the one suggested above, but with a slight difference:

ספרי במדבר פרשת שלח פיסקא קז

דבר אל בני ישראל כי תבאו אל ארץ מושבותיכם, ר' ישמעאל אומר: בא הכתוב ללמדך שלא נתחייבו ישראל ... אלא מביאתן לארץ ואילך.

Sifrei BeMidbar, *Shelah*, Piska 107

“Speak to the children of Israel and say to them: When you come to the land of your settlements, etc.” Scripture comes to teach us that Israel were obligated... only after inheritance and settlement (of the land)... These are the words of Rabbi Yishmael.¹

According to Rabbi Yishmael’s interpretation, one must observe the Passover and the redemption of the first-borns only inside the land. It appears that the phrase “when you enter” is understood not only as a designation of space, but also as one of time—the time, or event, of entering the land. Thus, the *midrash* of the Rabbi Yishmael school indicates that the phrase refers not only to a physical entering into the land, but also to a reality in which the Jews have political sovereignty over the land:

ספרי במדבר פרשת שלח פסקא קז

אחר ירושה וישיבה הכתוב מדבר. אתה אומר אחר ירושה וישיבה הכתוב מדבר או אינו מדבר אלא בכניסתם לארץ מיד? ת"ל כי תבואו אל הארץ אשר ה' אלהיך נותן לך וירשתה וישיבתה בה (דברים יז, י"ד) הואיל ונאמרו ביאות בתורה סתם ופרט לך הכתוב באחת מהם שאינו אלא לאחר ירושה וישיבה.

Sifrei BeMidbar, *Shelah*, Piska 107

You say after inheritance and settlement, but perhaps immediately upon their entry to the land? It is, therefore, written: “When you come to the land that YHVH your God gives to you, and you inherit it and you settle in it, etc.” (Deuteronomy 17:14). Since “comings” are mentioned in the Torah unqualified, and in one instance it is specified, after inheritance and settlement, so all (“comings” are understood as) after inheritance and settlement, which teaches us that wherever “settlements” is written, after inheritance and settling is understood.

¹ I want to thank Noa Yisraeli who first introduced me to these fascinating sources. I look forward to the completion of her research on this topic.

According to this interpretation, commandments of which it is written in the Torah “when you enter” only apply when Israel are in a state of sovereignty in their land. Rabbi Yishmael, in essence, suggests that *mitzvot* qualified by “when you enter” are in a state of suspension until such a time as Israel will exist in a reality of post-inheritance and settling, i.e. a reality of sovereignty in the land.

Since Rabbi Yishmael lived at a time during which the Jews were not sovereigns over their own land, it appears that this interpretation had practical ramifications in his day. In his view, many *mitzvot* in the Torah were not actually meant to be fulfilled in practice at that time, nor would they be required in practice in the foreseeable future.

Rabbi Akiva’s school present a different exegetical direction, which reads the phrase “when you enter” not as a directive for a future time, but rather as language relating to the present, which has ramifications for the future:

מכילתא דרבי שמעון בר יוחאי פרק יג

"והיה": אין והיה אלא מיד. "כי יביאך" עשה מצוה האמורה בענין שבשכרה תכנס לארץ.

Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, Chapter 13

“And when”—“and when” means nothing other than immediately. “When God has brought you into the land”—fulfill the commandment mentioned herein, for on its merit you will enter the land.”

And thus also, explicitly, in the exegesis on the verse that opens our *parashah*:

ספרי דברים פרשת כי תבוא פסקא רצז

(כו א') 'כי תבוא אל הארץ' עשה מצוה האמורה בענין שבשכרה תכנס לארץ.

Sifrei Devarim, Ki Tavo, piska 297

“And it shall be [when you come to the land]”—Perform the *mitzvah* mentioned herein, in whose merit you will enter the land.

According to Rabbi Akiva, the Israelites are commanded to observe the *mitzvot* already in the wilderness, and their fulfillment becomes a condition for entering the land. Rabbi Akiva’s interpretation opens up the possibility of a full religious existence even outside of the land, and perhaps *especially* outside of it.

Thus, two different perceptions of the land, of the observance of the *mitzvot* and of the link between the two emerge from the two schools—that of Rabbi Yishmael and that of Rabbi Akiva: While according to the simple reading of the verses and Rabbi Yishmael’s interpretation there is an objective of sovereign existence in the land, in order to reach a state of full observance of the *mitzvot*, according to Rabbi Akiva the observance of the *mitzvot* is a means for obtaining the land. Rabbi Akiva breathes life into commandments that are ostensibly dependent on independent life in the land, and makes them applicable even outside of it. Thus the land becomes a distant dream to which we aspire, but is not a necessary condition for the full religious observance of the *mitzvot*.

Rabbi Akiva’s interpretation joins a long exegetical tradition which, over generations, turned “the land of Israel” into an idea, an aspiration, a goal. This interpretation can perhaps be understood against the background of the political reality that prevailed for many years, in which the Jews did not live in the land of Israel, and were not independent politically. In order to maintain relevance, the Jewish tradition transformed the *mitzvot* into rituals that were relevant even without fulfilling the condition of sovereign Jewish life in the land. The commentators thus managed to preserve a core notion within Jewish tradition, which might have led to an untenable breach within its confines, by investing it with new meaning.

We, who live in a time of Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel, are now faced with a great challenge: How do we live now? With what religious, and general, content do we invest the relationship between the observance of the *mitzvot* and the land? Or, in other words: What is the meaning of the *mitzvot* that are reliant on the land, according to the two schools of thought presented above, and how do we conduct ourselves in a reality in which the goal presented by Rabbi Akiva has ostensibly been fulfilled? In light of the new political reality of the Jews, we must have a conversation about how to realize the reality of “post-inheriting and settling” the land of which the Torah speaks, and how to fill it with mature, responsible, and holy Jewish content.